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SUBJECT: SANTA CRUZ AUTONOMY VOTE: PLANS FOR A "BIG PARTY"

11. (SBU) Summary: During an April 24-27 visit to Santa Cruz (including the capital city and the rural towns of San Javier and Concepcion), American Presence Post officer's (APP) interlocutors downplayed fears of violent confrontation and predicted the May 4 autonomy referendum would be a "big party." Supporters of President Evo Morales' MAS party are mostly planning to abstain from the vote. Civic leaders have recruited and trained volunteers to help maintain the peace in the absence of police commitment and manpower, and are disseminating a consistent message of non-violence. Voter turnout is expected to be high, and polls predict a resounding victory for autonomy in the range of 70-80 percent. End summary.

12. (SBU) APP officer visited Santa Cruz April 24-27 to gauge the temperature prior to the May 4 autonomy referendum. Contacts in the Santa Cruz Civic Committee and Prefecture outlined preparations for voting day. Traditionally motor vehicles are not allowed to circulate during elections, but the authorities know they cannot count on the national police to enforce roadblocks. Therefore, the civic committee has organized volunteers to set up and man roadblocks at the entrances to each neighborhood. Because people are used to such roadblocks on election days, no one expects controversy. Nor will there be massive conflicts between people in different neighborhoods, because they will not be able to get to one another. Thus, any conflicts will be contained locally within neighborhoods. The civic committee also secured agreement from 2,500 vendors to avoid opening markets on referendum day, and from the public transportation union. This should also contribute to peace and order; the city will come to a halt.

13. (SBU) Civic committee leaders are confident there will not be marches on Santa Cruz by "social movements" from La Paz or by cocaleros from the Chapare region of Cochabamba. But in case there is any unexpected eastward movement by these groups, Santa Cruz leaders have a simple contingency plan: block the roads into the department. It's too far to walk.

14. (SBU) The prefecture and electoral authorities have invited many groups to "observe" the elections, although they could not convince the Foreign Ministry to convoke international observers from Embassies or the Organization of American States. Some of the groups expected to be present in Santa Cruz on May 4 include human rights foundations from Colombia and Argentina; Human Rights Watch from the U.S.; individual state governors and national legislators

from Paraguay, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile; and prefects and mayors from throughout Bolivia. Several Embassies (including the U.S.) are sending officers from La Paz to Santa Cruz to be present during the election; they will not/not be there in the capacity of "observers."

As of April 24, there were 300 journalists from 200 media outlets from 45 countries accredited to report on the referendum (many are also covering the Baroque Music Festival currently taking place in the Jesuit Mission communities throughout Santa Cruz).

15. (SBU) The pro-autonomy campaign has focused on a positive message in a festive atmosphere, and civic authorities have disseminated a consistent "no violence" message from the start. However, they admit there are some radicalized groups in Santa Cruz over which they have no control, and the government's strategy will be to provoke violent incidents that will de-legitimize the results. Therefore, they are redoubling efforts to get out the "no-violence" instruction to all the volunteers that will be helping to maintain order, both those from Santa Cruz and those that are arriving from other "Media Luna" departments (Pando, Beni and Tarija) to help. The closing event of the "yes" campaign will be a candlelight vigil on May 30 with the message "Light the eternal flame of hope" for a better Bolivia.

16. (SBU) Voter turnout is expected to be high. In a normal election year, about 35,000 new voters register in Santa Cruz (those that turn 18, those that have changed residences, those that have migrated from other areas of the country). This year, 100,000 new voters registered. The civic committee explained some of that number were voters that were erased from the list by the National Electoral Court and then re-registered. However, that alone can not explain the massive numbers of new registered voters. There is great enthusiasm for the referendum.

17. (SBU) The civic committee's latest polls show that autonomy will win in all the districts of the city, even in those neighborhoods where Evo Morales' MAS party has strong support. Autonomy is also expected to win in all but two of the 15 provinces. In another decision aimed at keeping the peace, the departmental electoral court will send ballots to all municipalities, but will not force any locality to open a polling booth. Therefore, in those few areas where most citizens are opposed to the referendum, or where authorities fear conflict, voting simply might not take place.

Don't Vote No, Just Don't Go  
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18. (SBU) Despite the conflicting messages in the media (with the government calling for mobilizations against the referendum one day and denying it the next), the order trickling down to MAS party bases is to abstain. The government hopes low voter turnout will either invalidate the referendum, or at least de-legitimize it. Polls show that as many as 80 percent of registered voters plan to vote, so this strategy seems futile, although it will indeed help avoid confrontation on May 4. In any case, it is an easy order to follow in the face of an inevitable win for the autonomy referendum.

Pro-Autonomy Masistas  
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19. (SBU) The towns of San Javier and Concepcion both elected MAS mayors and have generally greater sympathy for the Morales government than residents of Santa Cruz city. Nonetheless, the MAS mayor of San Javier proudly presented APP officer with a "Si, Autonomia" keychain. He said that though he was elected on the MAS ticket, he represented the town's citizens, and they overwhelmingly believed autonomy was the best path to future development. The mayor said he had received a Venezuelan check under the "Evo Cumple" program, and had used the money to refurbish the soccer stadium, to the delight of the town's youth. President Morales was putting tremendous pressure on the mayor to inaugurate the project on Saturday, April 26, but the mayor pushed back. He told APP, "I don't want Evo in my town the week before the referendum." The Mayor of Concepcion, who replaced the original MAS mayor when he stepped down due to corruption charges, told a similar story.

110. (SBU) Both mayors insisted there would not be referendum-related

violence in the provinces, although they were taking precautions. For example, there are only two police assigned to the municipality of San Javier, but the mayor's office had recruited 120 citizen volunteers to maintain security, both during the ongoing Baroque Music Festival, and the referendum. A MAS city council employee in San Javier said she was firmly opposed to autonomy, but knew it would win. She said she and like-minded citizens simply would not vote, and would focus on what comes next (reconciling the autonomy statute with the MAS draft constitution).

¶11. (SBU) Comment: Though it is impossible to be certain no violence will occur on May 4 in the Santa Cruz department, local authorities are working hard to maintain the festive atmosphere and minimize the potential for conflict. They recognize that the referendum is not the end of a process, but the beginning, and the hardest work is yet to come.  
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